



The California Cities Gang Prevention Network

Welcome to the eleventh bulletin of the California Cities Gang Prevention Network! This month we spotlight innovative partnerships in Los Angeles and San Bernardino with child welfare departments. The Network welcomes the opportunity to discuss how child welfare services can complement a comprehensive strategy against gang violence.

MART Program - Los Angeles

The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), in partnership with the LA County Sheriff's Department, established the Multi-Agency Response Team (MART) in January, 2004. Through this partnership DCFS deploys a rapid-response, highly trained team of children's social workers alongside law enforcement agencies when they are called on to enter homes. In these often traumatic circumstances, MART is dedicated to providing intensive child protective services to children and families through a joint expedited response with law enforcement to volatile environments where gangs, narcotics, and weapons may endanger a child's life. The primary strategy of MART is to conduct joint child endangerment assessments with law enforcement at the time of and congruent with criminal investigations and tactical entries into homes. To date, MART has responded alongside law enforcement to over 1,000 operations. They have provided child protective services to more than 5,000 children.

MART Supervisor and Law Enforcement Liaison Xiomara Flores-Holguin states that in many situations, law enforcement and child protection agencies work

with the same families. In fact, she estimates that 50% of the families in which an arrest by law enforcement has been made are under current investigation by DCFS. Children who live with an adult involved in criminal activity may be more likely to witness violence or encounter unsafe situations. Further, parental arrest may leave children without a parent in the home. When an adult is arrested, it is important to remember that the adult may be a father or a mother and that the needs of the children left behind must be addressed immediately. Because law enforcement agencies encounter at-risk children frequently, an effective partnership with child protection agencies is essential.

DCFS has sought to work collaboratively with LA County law enforcement agencies to address the needs of youth impacted by parental arrest or criminal behavior. Historically, DCFS and other external agencies have had difficulty establishing trust with law enforcement. In particular, according to Flores-Holguin, law enforcement officers were concerned that their investigations would be compromised by accommodating on-the-scene requests from social workers or by social workers disclosing sensitive information regarding their investigation. On the other hand, some social workers were suspicious of police officers and concerned about their tactics in the home.

Nevertheless, Flores-Holguin believes the agencies have been able to communicate their respective concerns and now have a "great working relationship." There are several key factors that enable this unique collaboration to work successfully. First, MART investigators are on standby at all hours of the day and night, prepared to respond to a request for assistance from law

enforcement during a warrant service, tactical raid, or arrest. These mobile social workers can accompany police within an hour to any location in the county. Second, MART has worked with their county-wide law enforcement partners to develop strict protocols for their social workers to follow during a tactical raid or arrest. The purpose of these procedural protocols, which include having social workers stay outside during raids and limiting their role in directing officers, minimizes any chance of interference. Further, only social workers with front line experience are hired to work for MART. MART social workers are highly trained to identify signs of neglect, abuse, and danger to children within the home environment. At the same time, to enhance social workers' ability to anticipate and find instances of child endangerment, DCFS has established effective communication between the agencies including access to centralized intelligence databases. MART also provides training to law enforcement agencies to help them more effectively identify situations that require MART's attention.

It took some time for the partnership to work. Initially police were reluctant to trust MART social workers. Frequently they would not call MART investigators when a case was first developing, waiting until after the investigation to involve them. However, after increasingly successful joint operations, MART has developed a sound reputation among officers, and MART investigators are called in regularly to accompany investigators during tactical raids. The collaboration has become so successful that other agencies are calling on MART to accompany their investigators.

This partnership has enabled Los Angeles County to better serve children and families living in dangerous home environments in a number of key ways. MART is able to reach children of arrested parents more quickly, thereby providing them with a better transition into alternative care. At the same time, MART can more effectively refer child welfare cases to the police when there is the need for a more serious criminal investigation. This sharing of information has enabled the county to tailor its approach to families and to provide a more holistic response to at-risk children.

Operation Phoenix - San Bernardino

San Bernardino Mayor Patrick Morris introduced Operation Phoenix (OP) in June, 2006. Operation Phoenix is a collaborative partnership that provides a coordinated interagency, multidisciplinary team approach to crime and violence through prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies in targeted areas with high-crime and high-resource needs. Operation Phoenix began in one 20-block area in San Bernardino, and is now operating in three high-need areas.

With its focus on protecting at-risk children, the Department of Children's Services (DCS) was a natural partner for Operation Phoenix. DCS has provided one social worker to work exclusively with OP since its inception. Originally, when Operation Phoenix operated in one 20-block area, all the calls referred to DCS for investigation into child abuse were sent to one social worker. By concentrating all efforts in one small geographic area, the social worker was able to fully know the resources available and the families living in that particular community. However, as Operation Phoenix expanded to three areas, one social worker was no longer able to handle all the referrals. Consequently, referrals from the Operation Phoenix areas are now handled in the general pool of referrals.

Janet Egan, the Social Service Practitioner assigned to Operation Phoenix, now works with families who are in need of help, but who are not referred to the DCS hotline for child abuse. This is a proactive approach to support families who need assistance, instead of waiting for these families' troubles to escalate to a child abuse or neglect situation. Operation Phoenix calls this a "differential response" and aims to provide more services up front before problems escalate. They have found that sometimes families just need a little extra assistance to overcome temporary challenges.

Egan assists families with a range of issues. These issues may include buying groceries, obtaining counseling services, or advocating for their children in the schools. Sometimes, the families are most in need

of somebody to talk to about their concerns. Egan estimates that she has worked with approximately 110 families in the six months she has been assigned to OP. A co-worker provides language assistance for Spanish-speaking families. Services usually last between one and two months. The vast majority of these families have been very receptive to her.

Egan has been able to link families with public resources for which they qualify, as well as resources available in the community through businesses, churches, and community-based organizations. Egan also takes advantage of the OP partnerships. For example, she can work with the OP public health nurse, street team, and law enforcement in these communities to better serve the families. San Bernardino's Children's Fund, a public-private partnership, which formed in 1986 to aid children, allocates a percentage of its resources to OP children. Egan can use these resources to help pay for needed items in the household. Egan admits that she does not have the same resources as a social worker who works with children referred to DCS for child abuse; for example, she does not have access to rental assistance and cannot refer families to private health facilities. Nevertheless, through her partnerships and creative use of existing resources, Egan feels she is able to work with the families to overcome some of their hardships.

Egan receives referrals from many resources in the OP communities. She is connected to all the local schools, and is alerted when a student's family seems in need of extra help. She also accompanies the OP street team when it conducts "walk-throughs" in the neighborhood, and offers assistance to the families that seem like they could benefit from her support. Law enforcement also refers her to needy families they encounter. Since this is not typically in law enforcement's purview, it has taken some time for police officers to begin to think about how to proactively connect the needy families they see with social workers. Their relationship with Egan has reminded them of the importance of making these connections, and they are increasingly referring

families to her. Egan, in turn, refers families to her partners if they are a better match for their needs, whether a public health nurse, a school aide, or law enforcement.

Operation Phoenix aims to help create communities where youth are safe and nurtured. Through the collaboration with DCS, OP is able to assist families through difficult times and to prevent hardships from escalating into more problematic situations. Operation Phoenix recognizes that in order to have strong communities, families must also be strong and healthy.

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The California Endowment is a private, statewide health foundation created in 1996 with a mission to expand access to affordable, quality health care for underserved individuals and communities, and to promote fundamental improvements in the health status of all Californians.

Created in 1992 as an independent, private foundation, TCWF's mission is to improve the health of the people of California by making grants for health promotion, wellness education, and disease prevention.

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